Accelerationism: Ray Brassier

Transcribed from the Backdoor Broadcasting Company recording.

I'm going to be talking about Nick Land's work. I'm going to talk about it philosophically, and explain why, because I think that's a key to understanding what its political ramifications might be. If you want to understand if a politics of accelerationism is possible or feasible, you need to confront the internal conceptual intelligibility of the accelerationist program.

Several of us here have been influenced by Land's work in one way or another. I once had a conversation with him, which consisted of a disagreement whereby he insisted I kept translating what he took to be pragmatic issues, issues of what he called "machinic practice", into conceptual issues. He accused me of philosophical conservatism, by insisting on translating what he took to be the pragmatic back into the theoretical. But I want to insist that this is necessary, because this "machinic practicism" that Land insisted on leads to a kind of practical impotence.

So I want to insist that it's necessary to confront fundamental conceptual issues before you can really understand what it is that you're doing. And in that regard, I don't buy into the whole rhetoric about the need to ditch representation. I think if you try to get beyond conceptual representation, you end up engendering performative contradictions, not just theoretical ones. Contradictions at the level of concepts manifest themselves as an incapacity at the level of practice.

That's why I'm going to operate in this way, and I'm going to do it by schematizing Nick's work or agenda in terms of three explicitly dialectical contrasts. Where a machinic pragmatism insists on the need to resist and to obviate any kind of dialectical antagonism or opposition, I think it's necessary to do that in order to be able to identify what its strengths and weaknesses are. The three points that I wish to focus on, or the three dyads, are: critique and materialism, teleology and eschatology, and practicism and voluntarism.

Robin Mackay and I are editing a volume of Land's writings, called *Fanged Noumena*. These texts are pretty extraordinary. As Mark said, no matter how much one may detest their rhetorical animus, it's simply not enough to dismiss them as a kind of puerile, indulgent hyper-Nietzscheanism. It's far more sophisticated than that, even if I do think it's stymied by incoherencies, and by any account, these are extraordinary texts. They provide a sobering contrast with the flaccid inanity of contemporary Bergsonian vitalism. The French philosopher Vincent Descombes once described Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* as manifestations of what he called "mad black Hegelianism". An attempt to find the prosecution of a kind of Marxist materialism that would somehow be anti-Hegelian. In the same regard, Land's work is a "mad black Deleuzianism", an attempt to turn Deleuze's vitalist impetus, the affirmationist *élan* that animates the Deleuzoguattarian corpus into something much more ostensibly unsavoury, but also much more conceptually liberating.

What is really interesting in these texts is the way in which there is an extraordinary re-elaboration of negativity, a kind of non-conceptual negativity, and these texts

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bristle with this kind of sublimated fury, and that's what makes them really powerful. Because I want to show that it's possible to rehabilitate the powers of the negative against what Ben Noys has called the "affirmationist consensus" in contemporary theory, this is a moment in Land's work that I'm acutely interested in, although I'll try to explain why I think he doesn't succeed in wresting the negative from, preventing it from being subordinated to, a kind of affirmationism.

First of all, Land is operating under the aegis of Deleuze and Guattari's work. He proposes to radicalise critique, to convert the ideal conditioning of the representation of matter to the material conditioning of ideal representation. In the Landian apparatus, materiality is construed solely as the production of production. Transcendental materialism in its Landian version becomes a materialization of critique. The critique of the Kantian critique of metaphysics, of which there are several versions, supplemented in various configurations by 20th century continental philosophy, is converted into a materialist metaphysics of critique, by collapsing the hierarchy of the transcendental and the empirical. The first move, the really interesting move, and in fact, the key to understanding the Deleuzoguattarian concept of destratification in Landianism, is that the first thing that needs to be destratified is the empirical/transcendental difference. This is seen to be the enabling condition for critical philosophy.

But it's no longer a Hegelian or dialectical sublation of this difference. It's non-dialectical. It's a reduction of the difference to matter, because Land claims thinking is a function of materiality, and representational thought, that is to say, conceptual categorization and even, on this account, the logic of the dialectic itself, is simply a circumscribed or depotentiated version of a functional potency generated by matter itself. The claim is that matter itself is synthetic and productive. Matter is primary process, and everything that unfolds at the level of conceptual representation is merely secondary and derivative. Synthesis is primary and productive, and all synthesis is the conjoining of heterogeneous terms.

What Land proposed to retain from Kant was the emphasis on the transcendental efficacy of synthesis, the primacy of transcendental synthesis, but no longer as the synthesis of empirical items, objects of experience anchored in a constituting subject. It's the self-synthesising potency of what he called intensive materiality. This becomes the key term. It's a brilliant explication of the logical operation that Deleuze and Guattari carry out vis-a-vis Kantianism in *Anti-Oedipus*. Matter is nothing but machinic production, self-differentiation, and the fundamental binary that organizes this materialist metaphysics is that between intensive materiality, which he identifies with the body without organs, and death, this moment of absolute indifference as absolute difference. Land is quite explicit about the link to a certain version of Schellingianism here. He explicitly links Deleuze and Guattari to Schelling.

The binaries between what he calls intensive zero as matter in itself and every kind of conceptual binary between concepts and objects, or representing and represented: the claim is that by levelling this fundamental dualism, the dualism of transcendental form and empirical content, you get this materialist monism where you explain how matter itself generates its own representation. It generates its own representation, and by this account, representation itself is relegated to the status of a transcendental illusion. It's a misprision of primary processes; it's at the level of merely secondary processes.

But this materialist critique of transcendental critique, I argue, reproduces the critical problem of the connection between thought and reality. Why? Because the problem then becomes: how can you simply circumvent representation, and talk about matter itself as primary process, about reality in itself? This process, which is obviously the problem which underlies Kantian critique in the first place, re-emerges in an exacerbated form in this materialist subversion of Kantianism. But the problem is

particularly acute, and this is where the Landian elimination of the Bergsonian component in Deleuze's thought becomes awkward, and generates a difficulty for him. Why?

In many ways, you can align the Deleuzian critique of representation with the Bergsonian critique of representation. Much of what Deleuze says is problematic about the categories of representation, about representation as the mediating framework that segments and parcels out the world, the flux of duration, into discretely individuated objects… the claim is that you have a sub-representational layer of experience which it is possible to access through intuition. The Bergsonian critique of metaphysics and the destitution of representation intuits the real differences in being, you can intuit the real nature of matter, time; duration in the Bergsonian register.

There's a problem here for Landianism, because he can't do this. He's supplanted representation, but he wants to supplant this kind of Bergsonian vitalist phenomenology for an unconscious thanatropism. The point is: how do you access the machinic unconscious? It's not simply given. Land insists time and time again, nothing is ever given, everything is produced. The problem is that Land's materialist liquidation of representation, because it doesn't want to reaffirm, allegedly, the primacy of sub-representational experience, which Bergson and phenomenology do in various ways… he has to explain what it is he's talking about. He's doing a kind of materialist metaphysics, and there's an issue about what kind of traction this extraordinarily sophisticated conceptual apparatus can gain upon the process of primary production, the real as intensive difference, matter in itself, whatever you want to call it.

This is an initial philosophical difficulty, which interestingly Land himself in conversation tried to dismiss by saying "well, you have to understand that thinking itself is no longer about representational congruence between concepts and objects, ideas and things, but is itself a productive process." The discussion of machinic mapping versus representational tracing in the opening plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that schizoanalysis, or rhizomatics, or whatever you want to call it, is itself a praxis, a doing. There's a positive feedback loop between what you are thinking about and your thinking. So that your conceptual practice is no longer tracing intelligible structures from a pre-existing, readymade reality, it's actually tracing movements and tendencies in material processes. It becomes self-legitimating in this sense. The question then becomes one of intensification. It's no longer an epistemological question of the legitimacy or the validity of your thinking vis-a-vis an allegedly independent reality, it's simply a question of how your schizoanalytical practice accentuates or intensifies primary production, or on the contrary, delays and inhibits it. Truth or falsity becomes subordinate to the dyad intensificatory/deintensificatory. This is the conceptual trope which becomes translated into a political register. At the level of what it is you're doing as a machinic materialist, intensifying primary production; all your practices become governed by the imperative to intensify and accelerate. To ruthlessly demolish any obstacle that threatens to delay or inhibit this.

I think there's a problem here, and the problem is this: the concept of intensity becomes fatally equivocal in this register. There's an equivocation between the Kantian talk of intensities at the level of appearances, and the Bergsonian talk of intensive difference as qualitative difference of experience of duration. When Bergson is talking about intensity, he means a difference in quality which can never be mapped on to magnitude or extensity. But this experience of intensity has a phenomenological correlate.

Hence, vitalism is hence all about having intense experiences. But Landianism can't avail itself of this register of intensification, because he's not interested in

phenomenological subjectivity and he's not interested in experiences insofar as they are experiences of a subject in the Deleuzoguattarian register: an organism, with a face and a personal identity, etc. These are all the things that are supposed to require destratification.

The claim that you can dispense with the need of any epistemological legitimation for your metaphysics by simply saying it's not about truth or falsity, it's just about the intensification of the primary process, is incoherent, because matter itself as primary production, or death, is not translatable into any register of affective experience or affective intensity.

This is why I find this move unconvincing, the claim that you can just keep on intensifying and intensifying. The second problem arises here: a kind of imperative to affirm re-emerges, because the claim is that, in mapping the process of movements of deterritorialization and partial reterritorialization, you're mapping activity itself, because it's nested upon the strata, it occupies an immanent position vis-a-vis these material processes; you no longer have the transcendent exteriority between theory and world. Theory itself is implicated in the reality it's describing. Then things become unclear.

There is a substitution, of a sublimated materialist eschatology, for all forms of rationalist teleology. Why keep intensifying? Because there is always a surplus of stratification. One wouldn't need to deterritorialize and destratify unless there was always a complement of reterritorialization and restratification. You only need to deterritorialize because there are strata. Why is there stratification in the first place?

Because there is an organising dualism. The claim is that, although the real itself is absolutely deterritorialized, the degree zero of absolute intensity, it's always differentiated and stratified, sedimented in various complex ways. Once thinking itself becomes subordinated to the imperative to intensify and destratify, it's clear that there must be a limitrophic point of absolute deterritorialization towards which the process of affirmation or acceleration tends.

If you're accelerating, there are material constraints upon your capacity to accelerate, but there must also be a transcendental speed limit at some point. The ultimate limit is not a limit at all for him, it's death, or cosmic schizophrenia. That's the ultimate horizon. Land unabashedly endorses this remarkable thesis of *Anti-Oedipus*, but strips it of all its palliatives, about how this might generate new forms of creative existence, etc. For him it's just: "at the end of the process is death".

The title of one of Nick's papers is called "Making It With Death", a brilliant title. Because death is inherently productive, it's the motor, the mode of antiproduction which generates all production, the production of production. This is not simply Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", where life itself and all vital differences are unilateral deviations from intensive death. The claim is that you can have a moment of convergence with absolute intensity, or absolute deterritorialization. What is this, who would be the bearer, what vehicle would continue to exist to be the bearer of this thanatropic acceleration?

Not the human species, certainly. The claim is that all terrestrial history is a history of intensification, of human social organisation and the developments of advanced technological capitalist society are just a moment or a phase in the process. The continuation or intensification of the process demands the elimination of humanity as a substrate for the process. The question is then, under what conditions?

Here I think a fundamental contradiction, a conceptual incoherence emerges: how can you intensify when there is no longer anything left to intensify? If your schizoanalytical practice is fuelled by the need to always intensify and

deterritorialize, there comes a point at which there is no agency left: you yourself have been dissolved back into the process. Once secondary production has been re-integrated or feeds back into primary production, ironically what you have is a bizarre mimesis of the serpent of absolute knowledge, except this time, it's the serpent of absolute production.

The point is that organically individuated human subjects cannot position themselves vis-a-vis this circuit or this process. It's happening without you anyway. It doesn't need you. The very concept of agency is stripped out. There's a quote of Land's: "it's happening anyway and there is nothing you can do about it." Something is working through you, there is nothing you can do about it, so you might as well fuse. This is a philosophical problem. It's a retention of this romantic, Schopenhauerian idea of fusion between the personal and impersonal, the individuated subject and cosmic schizophrenia, the impersonal primary process. But for Schopenhauer it still makes sense to postulate that. The moment at which the will turns against itself governs Schopenhauer's whole ethical and practical philosophy.

For Land, there is no longer any kind of fulcrum for the point of reversion, the conversion from secondary to primary process, because there are no individuated bearers left any more. This convergence does not unfold at the level of experience. In that regard, the whole vocabulary of intensification and disintensification becomes redundant. The paradox is simply this: under what conditions could you will the impossibility of willing? How could you affirm that which incapacitates all affirmation?

This is a conceptual problem with interesting practical and political consequences. It has a political valence, because I think it explains Nick's political trajectory from a kind of radical ultra-left anarchism. From a point when, in a paper called "Kant, Capital and the Prohibition of Incest: a polemical introduction to the configuration of philosophy and modernity", he says "the state apparatus of an advanced industrial society can certainly not be defeated without a willingness to escalate the cycle of violence without limits." Interestingly, in this paper, it's radical guerrilla militant lesbian feminists who are the only revolutionary subjects.

He moves from this moment, where he's perfectly willing to endorse or affirm radicals, where his critique of the Marxist left is that it's not radical, revolutionary, or critical enough, and then five or six years later he seems to realize there is no bearer of revolutionary intensification left. Therefore politics must be displaced, it must be deputized, and all you can do is endorse or affirm impersonal processes which at least harbour the promise of generating or ushering in the next phase of deterritorialization.

What does this mean? It means affirming free markets, deregulation, the capitalist desecration of traditional forms of social organization, etc. Why? Not because he thinks it's promoting individual democracy and freedom. He has to instrumentalize neoliberalism in the name of something allegedly far darker and more potentially corrosive, but in the process it seems you end up… if your enemy's enemy is your friend, there comes a dangerous point where you forget the conditions under which you made this strategic alliance, because you can no longer see, you can no longer identify what the goal is any more. You end up endorsing and embracing a kind of neoliberal politics or ideology, and the pretence of instrumental distance, that this could just be the cunning of schizophrenic reason, quickly evaporates because it's not possible to dissociate praxis from identifiable ends any more.

In other words, once you dissociate tactics and strategy–the famous distinction between tactics and strategy where strategy is teleological, transcendent, and representational and tactics is immanent and machinic–if you have no strategy, someone with a strategy will soon commandeer your tactics. Someone who knows what they want to realize will start using you. You become the pawn of another kind

of impersonal force, but it’s no longer the glamorous kind of impersonal and seductive force that you hoped to make a compact with, it’s a much more cynical kind of libertarian capitalism.

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